

The Poetry of Soccer Commentary

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January 27, 2023



My first interpretative encounter with poetry began with Niyi Osundare's ecopoetics in the poem "Ours to Plough Not to Plunder," included as one of several works to study for the year's pre-university exam. But it was William Wordsworth's definition of poetry, which I came across in an English lecture on the subject of British Romanticism at the university of Ibadan in the early 2000s, that has stayed most with me. In the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth described Romantic poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that takes its origin "from emotion recollected in tranquility." I am not a scholar of poetry but I think a lot about this definition, even if not in the classroom space where I would normally teach literary analyses. In front of a screen watching a game of football and thinking about the 'poetry' of the beautiful game, the different degree of emotions it provokes among fans, in my thinking, is reminiscent of the many idioms of aural pleasures one would normally find in verse forms.

The beauty and rhythms of telegraphic passes, the skillful arrangement of techniques in soccer, as we like to call football in North America, as well as the occasional ceasuras of referees and VAR officials, and the deafening sounds of unruly crowds, all probably offer some kind of aesthetic nods to some of the best poetic works in printed texts. But I am actually referring to the more rhetorical dimensions of soccer that conduce it to sublime grandeur and emotional intensity: soccer commentary, which, I might add, is as much a source of pleasure for many as the game itself. The sublime and even the beautiful, in their pre-Kantian, Classical sense was probably what one sociologist had in mind when he told me that the commentary "is the reason we watch the game."

And it is probably my own training in language that explains this attention to football commentary as a means of situating and vivifying on-field play for radio and TV audiences. This awareness was one reason I could, some years ago, immediately detect in some commentary discourses an essentialist site for producing and circulating mythologies of Black racism among some white commentators, a topic I wrote about during the 2018 World Cup in Russia. But I actually started

listening to sports commentary before my formal training in English at the university, as there is a sense in which sports commentary could actually be said to have inspired my interest in English as a discipline of study.

In my young world, nothing could rival the poetic brilliance of Akinloye Oyebanji, Ahmed Adio, and Emeka Odikpo who coined the phrase “Dammam Miracle” in 1989 to capture a famous comeback in Nigerian football history that took place around the Persian Gulf In Saudi Arabia. These were some of the major voices that blared through the airwaves of Nigerian radio and television stations when I began to pay attention to the beautiful game and the language that was articulated with it. In their artful localization of global English, these commentators produced a sonic archive of sporting discourses and analyses that graphically described matches and footballers in the most elegant manner. If the famed 1994 class of Nigerian Super Eagles that mesmerized the world in the US and later at the Olympics in 1996 were heroes for my generation, their best exploits were conveyed by storytellers who through the power of imaginative language made it possible to appreciate the magical displays of Nigeria’s golden generation. Behind this golden generation were golden voices that made radio commentary more appealing than even the visuals of television. In the current age of podcasting, radio was the most immediate medium for making sense of sporting soundscapes in the pre-digital Lagos of my childhood. Yet the history of football commentary in Nigeria had been written mostly by one man a decade before the 1990s, the broadcast journalist of the popular Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), Ernest Okonkwo. Here is a reconstruction of a piece of commentary:

Odegbami dilly-dallies, shilly-shallies, and locates Elastic Humphrey Edozor. The storm is gathering near the opponent’s goal area, and it will soon rain a goal. Edozor turns quickly to the right and returns the ball to Odegbami. Odegbami kicks the ball towards Quicksilver Sylvanus Okpala who shoots an intercontinental ballistic missile from outside the penalty box. It is a goal! It is a goal!! Nigeria has scored!

In a 1985 World Cup qualifier between Nigeria and Tunisia in Lagos, a match Nigeria had to win to stand any chance of qualification, Okonkwo could be heard describing the understanding between two Eagles players: *Okey Isima, with a short pass to Sylvanus Okpala. They both play in Portugal. They can communicate in Igbo; they can communicate in English; they can communicate in Portuguese and they just communicated with the ball.*

The repetitive cadence of the communicative act collides creatively with the personified in this instance to verbally signal an increasing moment of suspense in the match. In a tribute to the journalist, Nigerian football legend Segun Odegbami, whom Okonkwo named “Mathematical” for the latter’s calculative artistry on the pitch, Okonkwo for the clear leader in a group that included the finest commentators -including Ishola Folorunsho, Sebastine Effurum, Kevin Ejiofor, Tolu Fatoyinbo, and Bala Muhammed. Ernest Okonkwo, Odegbami wrote “stood slightly apart and ahead, shining just that little bit brighter in that constellation of stars that turned commentating into an art form and made listening irresistible.”

It is this fact of football commentary as an artform that appeal to me the most when I watch sporting events and it is unfortunately what is now conspicuously absent in a Nigerian football ecology whose decline mirrors the deterioration of the intellectual and infrastructural cultures that produced an era of sporting journalism that is now sadly consigned to the past in the country. Odegbami went on to describe Ernest Okonkwo as “a master of descriptive language, always conjuring words easily, effortlessly and aptly like a magician with his bag of tricks. He had the power in words to give life to the most boring game. He was a flawless master of the English language, often taking listeners to

the limits of their imagination.” I may have been too young to experience Okonkwo’s sonic dance with words in real time, but uploaded sound and video clips on YouTube offer some archival footage of this reality. With language as a means of animating boring games and constructing for fans the special moments of a match, some of the most poetic acts of football commentary emerge after the familiar tranquility in a match disappears and gives way to a surfeit of the most powerful emotions.

In more recent years, and turning away from Nigerian football, commentators like Jon Champion, Martin Tyler and especially Peter Drury take this poetic sensibility to an impassioned level that seduces you through the rhetorical force and vitality of words in football. Like Okonkwo, Drury certainly knows how to craft magical worlds out of a game’s finest moments. Like when South Africa hosted Africa’s first world cup and took the lead against Mexico, and Drury’s Tshabalala shout rang through the stadium, creating a synced rhyme with the unending blares of a thousand vuvuzela: *Tshabalala. Goal Bafana Bafana! Goal for South Africa! Goal for all of Africa...Rejoice!*

If Nigeria’s Okonkwo was famous for his tendency to name players based on their field attributes—for example, “Slow Poison”(Idowu Otubusen), “Elastic”(Elahor), “Tallest” (Emmanuel Okala), Chairman (Christian Chukwu), “Caterpillar” (Kelechi Emetole), and “Quicksilver” (Sylvanus Okpala)—Drury is the master of analogical nomenclatures. A time there was when Pep Guardiola substituted Gabriel Jesus for David Silva in an EPL game and Drury went: “Jesus for Silva, a move Judas Iscariot will be proud of.” Or when in another game Peter Czech saved a penalty from Gabriel Jesus and Drury commented: “Peter denies Jesus again.” While he is clearly drawing on Christian imagery and Biblical narratives to metaphorize proceedings on the field of play, it is the immediate relevance of these words in sculpting game play that resonates most with fans.

Perhaps Drury’s most poetic performance was his “Roma Have Risen from the Ruins” commentary offered in the closing stages of a UEFA Champions League match involving Roma and Barcelona at the Stadio Olimpico in Italy. Roma’s Greek defender Kostas Manolas had scored an unlikely goal at the 82nd minute to overturn the deficit of the first leg and put Roma through. The impossibility of Manolas’s third go and the staggering passions it provoked from fans who erupted in wild celebration after an unexpected comeback pushed Drury into one of his most iconic commentary lines:

Roma have risen from their ruins! Manolas, the Greek God in Rome! The unthinkable unfolds before our eyes! This was not meant to happen. This could not happen. This IS happening. It’s a Greek from Mount Olympus who has come to the seven hills of Rome and pulled off a miracle!

The rush of words from the commentary box, together with the jubilation of fans and players produce a sudden chaos that supplement the language itself. In this commentary piece, the Greco-Roman imagination emerges to color a rare moment of sporting brilliance, and it had to be delivered by a journalist whose affinity for language is matchless in many ways.

In a 2022 WC final that also presented spectators with a complex range of emotions in probably the best match in the history of the game, Drury perfectly reprised his poetic self when at the match’s opening he noted of the two major stars on the day: *Lionel Messi stares up at his final peak, Kylian Mbappe prowls in the foothills of greatness.*

He went to describe Argentina’s win in characteristic lyrical language: *36 years since Maradona and Mexico. Here, finally, is a nation’s new throng of immortals. Scaloni will be fated, Messi will be sainted France this time denied, defied.* Scripting a magnificent fairytale is not only the players who

furnish us with so much graces and splendor but also the broadcasters who capture these special moments for the rest of us. Like Okonkwo and Drury. These commentator-poets remind us of Robert Frost's words: Poetry is play. I'd even rather have you think of it as a sport. For instance, like football.' Frost was right. Poetry is like football, and football—both its on-field articulations and the language that is textured into kinesis and flows is like poetry in its most intense and spontaneous mode.

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